

The Thailand-Burma Railway

2019 Pompey Elliott Scholarship

Corporal Sarah Hiller

The following background is from the Australian War Memorial and Australian Museum.

15 February 1942 British commander Lieutenant General Arthur Percival. More than 130,000 Allied troops were taken prisoner.

More than 15,000 Australian soldiers were captured. Of these, more than 7,000 would die as prisoners of war.

The Imperial Japanese Army had invaded the Malay Peninsula on 8 December 1941, landing in the north at Khota Bharu in Malaya and Pattani and Songkhla in Thailand.

The majority of Australian prisoners from Changi and Java were sent to Thailand to assist in the building of the railway. D, F, H Forces and K and L Forces (Medical) left Changi in 1942-43 for Thailand. Prisoners of war were also transported from Java.

Dunlop Force, commanded by Colonel E. E. "Weary" Dunlop, arrived at Konyu, in Thailand, from Java in January 1943. It was divided into two battalions, each 450-strong: O battalion (commanded by Major H. G. Grenier) and P battalion (commanded by Major F. A. Woods). Dunlop Force was the first group of Australians to reach the southern end of the railway. Captain J. L. Hands commanded A battalion (337-strong), and the Dutch R battalion also came under Dunlop's command. The force eventually moved to Hintok.

D Force (2,242-strong under Lieutenant Colonel C. A. McEachern) left Changi for Bampong in four groups between 14 and 18 March 1943. Later, D Force moved to Hintok (to work on Pack of Cards Bridge), where McEachern took over the command of Dunlop Force. D Force was also stationed at Kanburi, Tarsau and Konyu, where they worked on Hell Fire Pass.

H Force, including 600 Australians commanded by Lieutenant Colonel R. F. Oakes, left Changi on 5 May 1943. From Bampong, they marched 140 kilometres north to Tarsau. H Force joined D Force in cutting Hell Fire Pass; 179 men in H Force died.

The railway was completed on 16 October 1943. Most prisoners were returned to Changi and some were sent as technical workers to Japan between April and June 1944 to work in heavy industry. They were concentrated in Saigon before moving to Japan. Some were returned to Singapore for shipping; others stayed at Saigon until the end of the war.

In 2019 as a serving member of the 8/7 Royal Victoria Regiment I was privileged to be awarded the 'Pompey' Elliot Scholarship. Due to life and COVID-19 I was not able to undertake the trip as planned until 2023. I had already done a tour of the Western Front and wanted to do something that was close to home and given my own physical limitations felt the Kokoda Trail was out so decided on the Thailand-Burma Railway. It is a part of Australia's military history that I knew very little about.

Late August 2023 saw me set off from our home in Ballarat to Thailand dragging my ex-army husband and two children (15 & 11) in tow. I received some great information and tips from several colleagues on where to go, what to see and how to get there etc.

Having served in Brisbane and Darwin in the ARA I was expecting the humidity that comes part and parcel of Asian countries, my Victorian bred children not so much. After flying into Bangkok into what felt like a

heatwave after leaving the cold Ballarat winter behind, we started to map out our plans. Accommodation was booked in Kanchanaburi but that was the extent of the plans.

We wanted to do as much as possible by utilising local information and means rather than tours booked to a schedule and so glad, we did. It gave us the opportunity to explore so much more and longer if we wished than a formal tour would have allowed us to.



We left Bangkok to travel to Kanchanaburi via the local railway system on a train I'm sure I have seen only in movies and museums. We spent four hours sitting on a hard wooden bench seat watching the landscape rattle by and locals interact and sell their wares. Very different to our airconditioned padded Vline trains. Despite the language barrier the conductor made sure we got off at the right stop.

Our first excursion in Kanchanaburi was to [The Thailand–Burma Railway Centre](#) which is located across the street from the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

The centre is very informative and set out so you follow a timeline from the first exhibit to the last. It includes many life size displays, dioramas and personal effects of those who lived and worked on the railway.



A Trestle from one of the many bridges built by the POWS





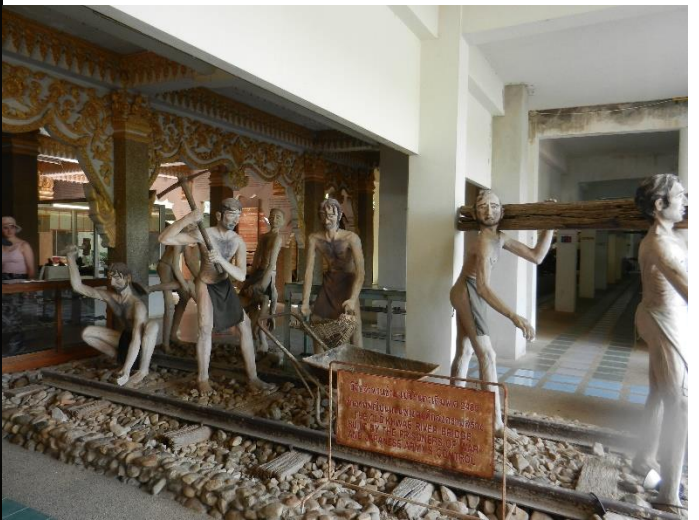
Then there is this strange museum in the middle of town claiming to be the World War II Museum and is often mistaken for the JEATH Museum. It attempts to cover a lot of the railway but is also a mish mash of other irrelevant collections – a rich jewellers fancy possibly? This museum even claims to have a casket filled with the bones of Native Asians who were forced to work on the railway line.

However, has great views of the Bridge on the River Kwai. The bridge is full of tourists walking along the railways. The train comes along and everyone just steps to the side.





World War II Museum



Hell Fire Pass

The highlight of the trip without doubt was Hell Fire Pass, also known as Konyu Cutting. We were told to catch the big red bus at the busy local bus depot. Again, the driver and his conductor made sure we got off at the right stop. The Hell Fire Pass centre is located within a Thai military base. There was a guide on the gate to advise how to get to the centre.



The Interpretive centre tells not only the story of the railway line and its construction but also the individual stories of the men who built it. You could easily spend a couple of hours reading the stories of the men and watching the testimonies that play in a continuous loop.



DEDICATION AND HELLFIRE PASS

คำอุทิศและช่องเขาขาด

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

สงครามโลกครั้งที่สอง

DEDICATION
The Hellfire Pass Dedication Centre, located just north of Hellfire Pass, was dedicated to all who suffered and died in the Burma-Thailand Railway. The names of all those who died are inscribed on the walls of the Dedication Centre, which is a place of reflection and remembrance for all who visit.

HELLFIRE PASS
The ground below this centre was a site of intense fighting during the Second World War. Allied forces fought to clear the area of Japanese forces, who were determined to use the railway as a supply line to Burma. The area was a site of intense fighting and many lives were lost.

คำอุทิศ
ศูนย์อุทิศแด่ผู้พลีชีพในสงครามโลกครั้งที่สอง (The Hellfire Pass Dedication Centre) ตั้งอยู่ที่เหนือจากช่องเขาขาดเพียงเล็กน้อย เป็นสถานที่ที่อุทิศแด่ทุกคนที่เสียชีวิตและเสียชีวิตในรถไฟสายพม่า-ไทยแลต

ช่องเขาขาด
พื้นที่ด้านล่างของศูนย์แห่งนี้เคยเป็นสถานที่ที่มีการสู้รบอย่างดุเดือดในช่วงสงครามโลกครั้งที่สอง กองกำลังสัมพันธมิตรต้องต่อสู้เพื่อขับไล่กองกำลังญี่ปุ่นออกจากพื้นที่นี้ กองกำลังญี่ปุ่นตั้งใจที่จะใช้รถไฟสายพม่า-ไทยแลตเป็นเส้นทางลำเลียงเสบียงไปยังพม่า พื้นที่นี้เป็นสถานที่ที่มีการสู้รบอย่างดุเดือดและมีการสูญเสียจำนวนมาก

THE WAR IN EUROPE
The Second World War in Europe was a conflict that lasted from 1939 to 1945. It was the deadliest conflict in human history, resulting in the deaths of approximately 70 million people. The war was fought between the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) and the Allied powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union).

สงครามในยุโรป
สงครามโลกครั้งที่สองในยุโรปเป็นความขัดแย้งที่ยาวนานที่สุดและโหดเหี้ยมที่สุดในประวัติศาสตร์ของมวลมนุษยชาติ ส่งผลให้มีผู้เสียชีวิตประมาณ 70 ล้านคน สงครามนี้เกิดขึ้นระหว่างอักษิ (เยอรมนี อิตาลี และญี่ปุ่น) และสัมพันธมิตร (สหรัฐอเมริกา สหราชอาณาจักร และสหภาพโซเวียต)



CAPTIVITY



BURMA-THAILAND RAILWAY
The Burma-Thailand Railway was a 415-kilometre railway line built by the Japanese during the Second World War. It was used to transport supplies and troops between Burma and Thailand. The railway was a site of intense suffering and death for the thousands of prisoners of war and forced laborers who were used to build it.







Tributes left by family members to remember those who served.





Hell Fire Pass Memorial and In Memory of Weary Dunlop plaque.





After reaching the Memorial where many turn back we decided to push on to three tier bridge. Unfortunately, we didn't make it to the end as we knew we wanted to catch the train back to Kanchanaburi.

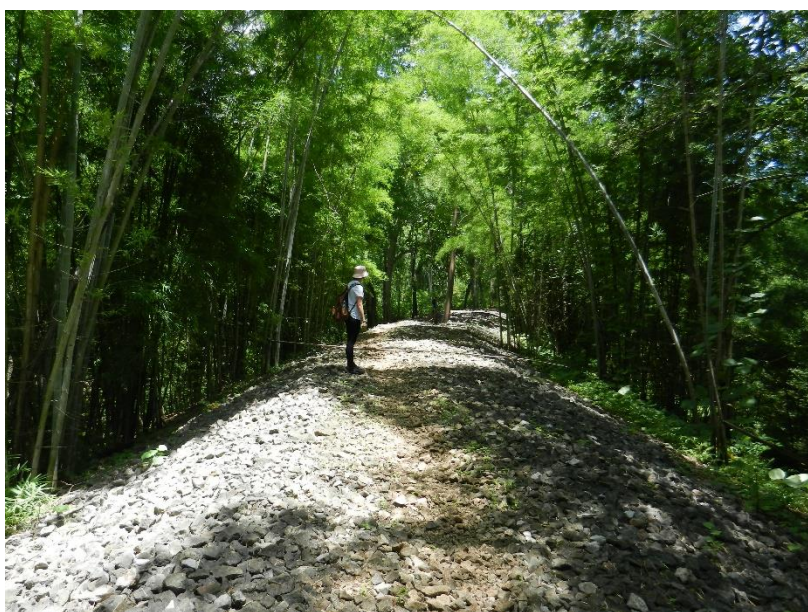






The POWs had to dig and blast their way through the mountain for hours on end often surviving on a handful of rice a day or what fish they source from the river if their camp was close enough.







The view from the centre

After racing to catch the big Red bus back to Kanchanaburi we jumped off at the next village in order to ride the train back.



The train uses the railway line that was built by the POWs including many parts that is still as it was when built. Many tourists jumping on to ride the trestle section where it clings to the side of the mountain and then getting off at the next stop.

There is no doubt it is a scenic view as it winds its way around the hills following the Kwai river. It also makes you wonder what these men endured in order to complete it in the timeframe the Japanese forced them to work too.





The train rambles over the River Kwai stopping at Kanchanaburi train station.



Final stops in Kanchanaburi included the war cemetery and JEATH Museum.

It is quite poignant that when you enter the cemetery the first grave you see is that of 22-year-old Australian Private Bradley who lost his life in November 1943 just after the railway was completed.

ยินดีต้อนรับสู่คณะกรรมการบริหารสุสานสงครามแห่งเครื่องจักรภาพ

Kanchanaburi War Cemetery



ในช่วงสงครามโลกครั้งที่สอง (พ.ศ. 2482-2488) ทหารของเครือจักรภพ เนเธอร์แลนด์ และอเมริกาจำนวนหลายหมื่นนายได้กลายเป็นเชลยศึกของญี่ปุ่น

ในปี 2485 ชาวญี่ปุ่นได้สั่งให้มีการสร้างทางรถไฟความยาว 250 ไมล์ผ่านผืนป่าบนภูเขาในประเทศไทยและเมียนมาร์ จึงได้มีการสร้างค่ายทำงานสำหรับเชลยศึกและแรงงานอื่นๆ ขึ้นหลายแห่งตามเส้นทางนี้ หนึ่งในนั้นคือค่ายกาญจบุรี (Kanchanaburi) ซึ่งเคยตั้งอยู่ที่นี้

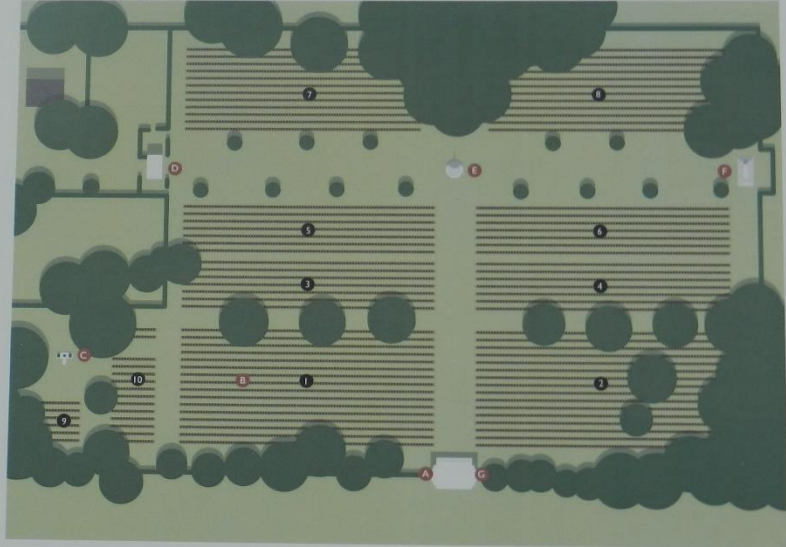
ในช่วงที่งานก่อสร้างดำเนินไปอย่างเต็มทีนั้น มีเชลยศึกกว่า 60,000 คนทำงานร่วมกับแรงงานท้องถิ่นที่ถูกบังคับมา 200,000 คน และทุกคนต่างตกอยู่ในภาวะทุพโภชนาการ มีโรคภัยไข้เจ็บ และได้รับการปฏิบัติอย่างไม่เหมาะสม ทางรถไฟก่อสร้างแล้วเสร็จในเดือนตุลาคม 2486 ณ เวลานั้นมีเชลยศึกกว่า 12,000 คนและแรงงานท้องถิ่นถึงครึ่งหนึ่งได้เสียชีวิตไปแล้ว

หลังปี 2488 มีการนำศพของทหารเครือจักรภพและเนเธอร์แลนด์มาที่นี่ โดยนำมาจากสุสานใกล้เคียงและสถานที่ต่างๆ ตามเส้นทางรถไฟส่วนครึ่งล่าง (ทิศใต้) จากกรุงทหพมหานครถึง Niek

ปัจจุบันมีศพทหารเครือจักรภพกว่า 5,000 นาย และศพทหารเนเธอร์แลนด์เกือบ 1,900 นายที่ฝังหรือมีป้ายรำลึกอยู่ที่นี้



เชลยศึกชาวเครือจักรภพในโรงพยาบาลญี่ปุ่นที่นครปฐม ประเทศไทย พ.ศ. 2488 © IWM HU 4569



- A สมุดรายชื่อทหารและสมุดเชลยศึกสุสาน
- B หลุมศพของนางจาร์ Alexander Dean พันท์ส่วนที่ 1 แนว J, หลุมที่ 23
- C อัฐิทหารเครือจักรภพ 300 นายที่เสียชีวิตด้วยหัวใจโรค
- D อนุสรณ์เพื่อรำลึกถึงทหาร 300 นายที่ได้รับบาดเจ็บ
- E "กำแพงแห่งความเสียดสี" เพื่อเชิดชูชาวคริสต์ที่ได้รับการฝังที่นี่
- F "ศาลแห่งความทรงจำ" เพื่อเชิดชูทุกคนที่เสียชีวิตในสงคราม
- G "อนุสรณ์กาญจบุรี" เพื่อรำลึกถึงทหารกองทัพอันตัย 11 นาย
- H สุสานสัมพันธมิตร หมายเลขเมือง





After the war priority was to find the living and repatriate them back to their countries. A group of men chose to stay on and assist with locating and identifying graves of those lost during the harsh unforgiving conditions, they were forced to live and work in. Even with limited resources every effort during the occupation had been made to record and account for every man and their graves. Therefore, they were able to recover the remains and moved to their final resting place.

Three cemeteries make up the final resting place for these men.





The JEATH Museum is a small museum located on the River Kwai that is dedicated to the construction of the Burma-Thai Railway. JEATH stands for Japanese, English, Australian, Thai and Holland as the principal nations involved in the construction.

There is a long hut that shows how the POWs would have lived but you are not allowed to take photos of the inside of the hut. The other buildings hold a variety of paintings, artefacts and newspaper clippings relating to the railway line.



Of course, a trip to Thailand is not complete without a visit to the Grand Palace and a visit to the gallery surrounding the Temple which depicts the story of the Ramakien. The story is about a battle between King Tosakanth – king of demons and the human king Rama. Toskanth Kidnaps Rama’s queen and the murals depicts the battles and the rescue of King Rama’s queen. There 178 panels in total.

I wish to thank the Royal Victorian Regiment Association for sponsoring the Pompey Elliott Scholarship and the 8/7 Royal Victoria Regiment for nominating me for this award. If not for this award I most likely would not have ever made the trip to Thailand or learnt so much about our rich if sometimes harrowing military history. These men and women were so brave and endured conditions many

of us could only wonder about. I feel extremely privileged and humbled to have had the opportunity to learn about and experience a fraction of what is Hell Fire Pass.